

MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society

REPORT

Report 28 Nov.-Dec., 1979

Focus on the Child

by Dorothy Yoder Nyce

As 1979 and the UN designated "Year of the Child" round out, we do well to ask ourselves what difference has the focus made? Will we be more sensitive to children in any year? Are we more ready to credit the insights of children? Who among us will come to the defense of needy children?

This issue of *Report* might find you reflecting on your own childhood; it hopes to nudge you to authentically make a difference in some child's life. You might begin by inviting a child to read and respond to what is/is not here.

Intended to stimulate further rather than comprehensively cover any subject, *Report* joins many resources in saluting THE CHILD. Our exposure begins with a brief biblical perspective, reflects on dimensions of adoption and peace consciousness, includes observations from children, offers a pot pourri and resources to ponder or pursue. Thanks to others who initially hoped to submit additional articles -keep the ideas formulating to eventually take shape for readers.

Several writers* refer to the ancient world's lack of responsibility for children. Then within old Greek culture children became especially dear to the gods. They performed priestly functions and were held in high esteem. Old Testament literature focuses attention on children as a "gift of God." (And how many of us have names that claim to have that as their designated meaning?) To be without child was cause for sorrow, especially during disasters that seriously decreased population. One Jewish statement summarizes the thought: "If anyone does not engage in increase, it is as though he were to shed blood or diminish God's image."

Yet to value or understand a child's individuality was not the purpose. To spend time with them was considered a waste of time. (Unfortunately, seeds of that mentality continue to sprout.) Their task was to learn obedience, to develop a sense of duty. Israelite children received instruction in the ways of Yahweh and the people's traditions. Within Judaism difference heightened between boys and girls. Only men were obligated to keep or justified in learning the Torah. Jewish boys then developed a strong sense of belonging to the community, circumcision being a fulfillment of duty.

The situation of a child in the ancient world was not much better. In the Greco-Roman world, the status of the child was often determined by the sex of the child. Girls were often seen as a burden to the family. Boys were seen as potential heirs and future leaders. This attitude towards children was reflected in the way they were treated in society. Children were often seen as less important than adults, and were often subjected to harsh punishment if they did not conform to societal norms. This attitude towards children was reflected in the way they were treated in society. Children were often seen as less important than adults, and were often subjected to harsh punishment if they did not conform to societal norms.

Continuing this sketchy overview, writers contend that "Jesus opposed the low estimation of children common among the people of his time." Included in salvation, they too receive God's love; they too should participate in important events. But this feeling for, empathy with, inclusion of children is not sufficiently reinforced in other non-gospel material or the Church Fathers. Our history of the past five centuries fluctuates in its praise of/little space for children. What then is the hope for children born? Christians would do well to hear and absorb Jesus' teaching.

Mark 10:13-16 (with parallels in Mt. 19:13-15 and Lk. 18:15-17) depicts one of Jesus' encounters with children.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (NIV)

Quite a few people enter this brief scene: parents and older children bringing younger ones, Jesus, and the disciples. To request a parting blessing was not unusual. Children did so of parents and disciples of rabbis. But here the situation differs. The request is on behalf of children; disciples are the ones attempting a blockade.

Like with petitions to touch the sick, Jesus responds to those bringing children, those who expected touch to make a difference. Perhaps they came in a sense of dedication, perhaps for protection. Perhaps the contact accompanied by prayer was to express a bonding and thanks among people soon to be separated. At any rate, there was boldness.

But that boldness the disciples misunderstood. Though acting as guardian for Jesus' time and dignity was not part of their mission, they nevertheless balked at the idea of delay. Especially delay brought about by the powerless. In their decisive attempt to control, the disciples tried to determine for whom Jesus was too busy.

Whose Child am I?

By Carolyn Weidman

And that stirred Jesus' anger! He became indignant (this is the only time this term characterizes Jesus in the gospels). Insensitivity to children was not to be tolerated. Jesus—ever radical—meant to include children, to credit them as significant people. Just to reinforce the point, and taking additional time, he lifted them into his arms and blessed. Only Mark's account is free to elaborate these human dimensions of Jesus: forthright indignation and affectionate surroundings. (How many of us experience both in our attempts at nurturing children and value his pattern?)

The clear imperative is to not hinder, to leave alone those bringing the children. To hinder can be both conscious and unconscious. Children can be misunderstood and blocked in development or they can be neglected, overlooked. They can be left out of conversation or thought to be too disruptive for more important adults. Their insights can be discredited, or what's worse, belittled.

But Jesus decidedly advocated for children. He uses the encounter to reflect how the kingdom or centrality of God depends precisely on strengths of childlikeness. Receptivity, accepting without prior claim, in gratitude receiving the Divine gift, the child models trust. (Matt. converts this into mere *humility*.) Here emerges a radical reversal of the human standard of merit. Those labeled weak or empty by the "superior" ones, to them the reign of God belong. How disconcerting! To value being unpretentious, being teachable, being spontaneously responsive leaves little space for skepticism, hardness, pride, "maturity."

For the child—untainted by adult misconceptions, unashamed of receiving God's gift—follows delighted jumping into open arms, blessing breathed into responsibility.

A possible response:

Friend of Children,

Grant us the indignation of Jesus when children are oppressed.

Grant us openness to learn from the children we meet.

Grant us a receptive response to Your Centrality.

Dorothy Yoder Nyce lives in Goshen, Indiana, studies part-time at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and is parent with husband John of two children.

*Standard biblical reference works were used in this study: commentaries, IDB, IB, TDNT.

My babies are growing up! Having worked as an adoption social worker for the past 10 years, I'm beginning to experience "the afterbirth" of adoption. I am now hearing from my adoptive parents who received infants and young children 10 years ago. These adoptive children are asking the sometimes feared questions. "Who was my real mother? What did she look like? Why didn't she keep me?" Adoptive parents are coming back to me now to ask about natural parents.

Women from 12 years to 40 plus sometimes face the heart-break of needing to place a child for adoption. The reasons are numerous: too many children in a financially deprived home, emotionally depleted parent or parents, young unrestrained or uninformed passions, broken promises and a multitude of other reasons.

Abortion is available for those who desire. The number of infants available for adoption has diminished dramatically the past few years. Therefore the babies placed for adoption today are generally cared about and planned for by their natural mother (and father). She loves the child enough to give him/her life and then because the natural parents do not feel they can care for the child, s/he is placed for adoption. The baby then receives a second set of parents, legally and emotionally. Both sets of parents are very real and very much a part of the child's life.

Agencies, courts, and parents (natural, adoptive, and step) are recognizing the roles all parents play in children's lives. At 18, adoptive children can obtain their original birth certificates and some courts are ordering that records be opened. Agencies are receiving calls from adults interested in locating their birth parents. Birth parents are sending pictures and letters to agencies saying "My child may want to look me up some day." Secure, loving adoptive parents are answering their adoptive children's questions honestly and perceptively every time they are asked. Love can encompass many people, even two sets of parents.

For some children who were not placed for adoption as infants, but perhaps should have been, the questions are even more difficult.

Children from 1-16 years are being, or are waiting to be adopted. Some of their questions might be "Why did my parents abuse, neglect, or abandon me? Why was I so unlovable? Why did I live with so many families?

"Six hundred thousand babies were born to unwed mothers under 20 during last year...Last year more than one million teens became pregnant." Boston Globe 6/10/79

From Early Anabaptism: "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children," by Hillel Schwartz, MQR, April 1973, pp. 102-114. ("The criterion by which Anabaptists measured child development was obedience...What was important in education and child rearing was the development of a mild, good, obedient self...the aim of child rearing—to promote a fear of God.") We probably should be in conversation with this or with Menno Simon's article "The Nurture of Children," pp. 945-952, Complete Writings of Menno Simons.

Why was I born with a physical or emotional handicap or born black and therefore hard to place?"

Many families or single parents today are trying to answer these questions as they adopt. To love a baby is easy, but fortunately because of the scarcity of babies, many other children are finding love, encouragement, acceptance, and permanence through adoption.

"Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything" I Cor. 13:8

Currently social worker for Bucks County Children and Youth in Adoptions, Carolyn has professional nursing experience in such areas as Public Health, a home for delinquent girls, and VN Christian Service. She is wife and step mother for three, living in Perkasie, Pa.

Raising Children for Peace

by June Schwartzenruber

Women have always had a vital part in helping children form their earliest attitudes about life. Before being thrust into formal educational institutions, small children have stood at their mother's knees and learned the basic rudiments of life. No one can estimate the value and the influence of these first informal learnings.

Women today continue to influence early attitudes of children. Women often carry the responsibility for the physical, emotional and educational welfare of small children. Women of peace must seize this unique opportunity and recognize their responsibility of sharing personal faith with children, helping them develop the resources to live positively and responsibly in a world of violence, hate and suspicion. The importance of consciously teaching peace attitudes continues as the children grow older.

The quality of life and the attitudes held by parents are basic to this educational task. Children learn by observation and imitation. Adult lives are more effective models for children than are spoken words alone. If children see adults struggling with the hard questions of life growing out of their Christian commitment and concern, they will better hear what is said and taught in formal educational settings. To be effective teachers of peace, each of us must:

1. Develop and think about our own theology and beliefs. We must struggle with important questions in our lives: What are the basic beliefs on which I base my life? What is of primary importance in teaching children—a dogmatic demand for strict obedience or an attempt to keep the lines of communication open? Which is more effective in teaching children—words spoken or lives and actions lived?
2. Work at practicing our beliefs. As Christian women we must exemplify God's love and

presence in our own lives, even though the world may appear to be falling apart. Recognizing that tense parents foster tense children, we must attempt being peaceful, relaxed persons ourselves, finding ways to instill faith and hope in other persons.

3. Develop a sensitivity to and awareness of others' needs and suffering and find ways to respond: Begin to see the world as a global village where the suffering of one affects all, and where one's affluence oppresses others; work seriously at lifestyle changes, reducing intake and consumption; think about why there is war, prejudice, violence (James 4:12) and strive to eliminate greed and materialism in our own lives; find new and peaceful ways to respond to violence in our communities and throughout the world.
4. Plan a positive teaching program to help children develop attitudes for peace. Help children: discover worthwhile life values, stressing the importance of people rather than material possessions; experience creative love and acceptance by examining methods of discipline, patterns of affirming individual self-worth, recognizing the need for and giving physical affection; evaluate messages they receive daily through radio, TV, books, peer groups; find room to grow in understanding by providing occasions for talk, encouraging questioning and evaluating of experiences and ideas, suggesting alternative means of problem solving and instilling cooperation and trust.

Helpful resources on children and peacemaking include the following:

The Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet. Quaker Project on Community Conflict, 15 Rutherford Place, New York, NY 10003.

Sharing Space, newsletter of the Children's Creative Response to Conflict Program, Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960.

A Manual on Nonviolence and Children. Nonviolence and Children Program, Friends Peace Committee, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

Alternative Celebrations Catalog. Alternatives, 1924 E. 3rd Street, Bloomington, IN 47401.

Hunger Activities for Children. Brethren House Ministries, 6301 56th Ave. North, St. Petersburg, FL 33709.

Mennonite Church Resources:

Foundation Series Sunday School Curriculum. (eg Grade 3-4, Year II, Quarter 4).

Herald Omnibus Bible Series, planned especially for summer Bible Schools, camp programs, etc. (eg. Grade 3 - "Love for God," Grade 10 - "Allegiance to Jesus").

Herald Youth Bible Studies "Which Lord?", 1973.

Church of the Brethren Resources:

Let's Be Friends (grades 1-2), *So What is Peace?* (grades 3-4), *Now, About Peace* (grades 5-6). Teacher's guides, 1971. Order from: The Brethren Press, 1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, IL 60120.

Children's Books:

Coals of Fire, by Elizabeth Hershberger Bauman, Herald Press, 1954.

The Friendly Story Caravan, by Anna Pettit Broomell, Pendle Hill Publications, paperback, 1962.

Potatoes, Potatoes, by Anita Lobel, Harper & Row, 1967.

Meet Martin Luther King, Jr. by James T. DeKay, Random House, 1969.

Write MCC Peace Section for the flier "Books That Make for Peace," listing books for primaries, juniors, families, parents and teachers, available through Provident Bookstores.

June is currently on assignment with the Ontario Mennonite Mission Board, working with her husband Hubert in church planting, and living in Toronto.

Anne Frank The Diary of a Young Girl

A Book Review by Lynda Nyce, Age 11

(Doubleday & Co., Inc./Garden City, NY), 1952.

This diary is Anne's account of the experience of two families plus several individuals in hiding in Amsterdam between 1942 and 1944. The "secret" annex is on the second and third floor of a warehouse. It had running water but no bath. They went there to hide because Jews were being hunted and destroyed.

I liked Anne's writing about her own life. The diary deals with hardships and also many fun times. A quality I liked about Anne that would be good to develop is her freedom to write about all her feelings. She called her diary "Kitty" and told "Kitty" everything. Most people are afraid to write about private feelings so much.

This book makes you feel like you are a good friend of Anne's. To read a book like this and know how many hardships Jews had is good. This is a great book. I encourage other children to read it.

Children Speak Up

If we would be more sensitive to children, we need to listen to them. To discover what is difficult for them to express, to know what they value, to perceive their pressures as they perceive them, to praise and encourage them involves inviting them to speak. Limited as it is, I did this with a SS class of eleven 10-12 year olds (7 girls). The questions were intentionally varied; the responses first impressions. Data gathered includes:

1. Seven of the group have lived in two cities; two of them in three countries.
2. Seven of the children's mothers are employed for income. Three children do not receive pay for work done at home.
3. Responses to "What is one Bible verse related to children?" were 4—"Obey your parents"; 3—"Let the children come to me"; 1—"Obey the Lord your God." (I wonder if the fact that no Bible stories about children were noted is significant.)
4. For relaxation, 7 children identified reading, 4-TV, 3-lie down (A few gave two.)
5. As for favorite authors: Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume were each identified three times; Allen W. Eckert, Laura Ingalls Wilder, James Harriot, and Paul Hutchens each once, one did not respond.
6. Eight of the children find school to be *fun and worthwhile*; 3-*so-so*; with no one checking *disappointing*.
7. Six chose not to respond to "What early memory do you have of God being personal to you?"; 4 identified God as Comfort—when "death of my brother," "almost hit by a car," "family moved," "living in a foreign country;" 1 suggested "through beauty in nature."
8. These children expressed a fairly strong sense of equal opportunity for themselves and their siblings in opportunities for 1) paid jobs, 2) going places away from home by myself, 3) making my own decisions. In each category two expect *more* opportunity; 1 boy and 2 girls expect *less* opportunity for paid jobs.
9. All but one (who did not answer yes or no) expect to learn to drive by age 16.
10. The question responded to least was "Do you think adults who never marry are more happy/strange/special?" There was 1 response each to the first two options and 2 for *special*.
11. "Child abuse" was perceived by six as "hitting" spanking without good reason, "hurting and then blaming the child." One noted "pouring pepper down the throat" (an incident recently in Goshen from which the child so "disciplined" died). One insightful abuse suggested was: "not loving but just giving money to."
12. As for improving interest for children in church worship services, 4 want more stories and plays; 3 wish for more easily understood content; 2 called for more participation of children.
13. First thoughts on knowing that a child died include: sorrow (for child and parents); *Why*

did that happen?; recalling good things done with the child; was the child good or bad and "if good, go to heaven;" and "a weird feeling I can't explain."

Another question is less easily summarized. Not a "model" listing of items, this only represents one way to let children know we value their thoughts. The fact that a couple asked "Is this right?" indicates that some need encouragement to personally claim their thoughts as valid, period. Devise your own tool; just encourage the children to speak up!

Resources

Resources related to children are numerous indeed. What is needed is selectivity. Needs vary and so do our interests as adults in reflecting about/identifying with children. The following are suggested with diversity in mind.

Callahan, Sidney Cornelia. *Parenting Principles and Politics of Parenthood*, (Penguin Books/Baltimore), 1973.

Friday, Nancy. *My Mother My Self The Daughter's Search for Identity*, (Dell Pub/NY), 1978.

Ourselves and Our Children: A Book By and For Parents, By the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, (Random House/NY), 1978. Chapter contents: Considering Parenthood, Beginning Parenthood, The Middle Years, The Teenage Years, Being Parents of Grownups, Sharing Parenthood, Families: the Context for Our Parenting, Society's Impact on Families, Helping Ourselves and Finding Help.

Human Sciences Press Children's Books has a fine catalog 72 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011. A few from the 1979 listing:

No Time for Me by John M. Barrett—"a helpful book for any child whose parents are both working. And helpful too, for the parents." Ages 4-8

If It Weren't for Benjamin (I'd Always Get to Lick the Icing Spoon) by Barbara Shook Hazen. "...warm wise light on the universal struggles for sibling rivalry." Ages 4-8

I Have Feelings Too, by Terry Berger. "...a major contribution for promoting understanding among children learning to adjust to a complex world." Ages 4-8

Daniel Discovers Daniel by John M. Barrett. "...portrays a common but seldom discussed problem, parental favoritism and the low self esteem of the unfavoured child." Ages 5-10

A New Mother for Martha by Phyllis Green. "...how a young girl learns to cope with the traumatic death of her mother, and the subsequent remarriage of her father." Ages 4-8

City, Sing for Me by Jane Jacobson. "...the emotional

trials of a girl who is forced to move from the countryside to the city." Ages 6-10

A resource highly recommended is *Books For Today's Children: An Annotated Bibliography of Non-Stereotyped Picture Books*. Compiled by Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff, Published by The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568. 193 books are identified under subjects of: "Working Mothers, Handicaps, Contemporary Grandparents, Multi-Racial, Single Parents, Sensitive Males, Adventurous Females, Adoption, Peer Relationships...and more!"

News and Verbs

About 250 persons attended the 4th Women in Ministry Conference, held Nov. 2-4 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. Diane L. MacDonald, Goshen College Theology professor, and Barbara L. Prasse, dean of students at McCormick Theological Seminary and Presbyterian minister, served as the major resource persons. Please check church periodicals for reports on the conference.

We are all saddened by the death of sister Doris Janzen Longacre, who succumbed to cancer on November 10, 1979. Doris is best known for the *More With Less Cookbook* now scheduled to go into its 20th printing. She had been working on a sequel volume on More With Less living. Doris touched and challenged the lives of many of us, through writings in Mennonite periodicals, More With Less workshops, Sunday School classes on journaling, her spiritual leadership in the Akron (Pa.) Mennonite Church, membership on the Goshen Biblical Seminary board, and her lifestyle which exemplified her convictions.

Life stories of fifteen Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren women are featured in the recently published book, *Women Among the Brethren*, edited by Katie Funk Wiebe. Included are biographies of such well-known women as Dr. Katharina Schellenberg, Anna Baerg, and Mary J. Regier Hiebert, plus other less prominent women whose stories are equally important—Sara Block Eitzen, Katharina Reimer Claassen, Justina Wiebe. Several chapters relate the experiences of women during World Wars 1 and 2, through translations of journals kept during those trying times. Order this 200-page paperback from the Mennonite Brethren Board of Christian Literature, Box L, Hillsboro, Kansas 67063. Price: \$6.95, (Canada—\$7.95).

Women and MWC—Making Headways

An ad hoc group of Mennonite women leaders met with Paul Kraybill, Mennonite World Conference Executive Secretary, during the Women in Ministry conference to discuss women's involvement in MWC. The group convened to respond to a letter from Kraybill regarding the participation of women at an MWC meeting of Asian Mennonites in Osaka, Japan in 1980, at the MWC General Council meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in 1981, and at the 11th Mennonite World Conference

in Strasbourg, France in 1984. Those present felt strongly that there should not be separate meetings for women at the next world conference, but that the overall theme should incorporate women's concerns, that women should be involved more fully as planners, speakers and leaders, and that women's issues could be discussed during special interest group sessions. In addition, some suggested that the conference schedule should be loosened up to allow for free time for women from different countries to meet informally with each other.

The group recommended an expanded meeting of the General Council in Nairobi, having the various conferences appoint additional delegates so that women are represented equally with men in the plenary sessions. Travel funds will need to be raised to fund additional representatives. Presently only four of the eighty General Council members are women. A number of Japanese or other Asian women should also be invited to the Osaka meeting the group felt.

Which Way Women?

The MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women commissioned Dorothy Yoder Nyce to edit a collection of writings by and about women to replace the "Persons Becoming" packet, which is no longer available. The result, a spiral bound booklet called WHICH WAY WOMEN? will roll off the presses early in 1980. The book's contents, on such lively topics as feminist theology, parenting, sexuality, women and consumerism, singleness, cluster around the three major themes of International Women's Year—Equality, Development and Peace. Order your copy in advance by writing to Peace Section Task Force on Women, MCC, Akron, PA 17501. Cost is \$3.00 (U.S.) and \$3.50 (Canada).

"Children are natural skeptics, insatiably curious, with a taste for hard facts, and a nose for dishonesty."—Christopher DeMuth

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Letters to the Editor

Dear Gayle:

In response to Rosie Epp's reflections on the New Men/New Roles conference in Winnipeg (*August Report*), this straight male was at home with the kids and housework. But from what I was able to take in, I'm not really surprised at the low attendance by my kind. We arrived (my wife, our son, my brother and I) in the middle of a confusing panel discussion among people who clearly didn't agree on the title phrase "in the light of the gospel." We then witnessed what had to be the conference's best feature, Tom Graff of Vancouver, being crowded out by a local female folksinger growling songs of lesbian love.

Most of my male friends are quite eager to live their lives in the light of the gospel. Conferences along the lines of New Men/New roles are a great idea, and their appeal would be broadened if their focus was sharpened.

In Christ,
Gordon Nickel
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dear Gayle Koontz,

This is a letter to respond to a number of things. Firstly, I've enjoyed reading the report of the Task Force for some years and would like to encourage you in your efforts. Several issues back some questions were raised in relation to women and power. It's a subject I'm interested in and would like further discussion about if it's possible....

Sincerely,
Evelyn Labun
Winnipeg, Manitoba